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BOSTON UNIVERSITY
GRADUATE SCHOOL

Thesis

A STUDY OF NATIONAL TRAITS IN AMERICAN DRAMA

Submitted by

Floy Irlene Klein

(A.B., Missouri Wesleyan College, 1924)

In partial fulfilment of requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts

1925

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Outline

I

Introduction

What is meant by American Drama.

II

Development

1. Foreign influences:

(German, French, and English)

2. Chronological list of representative

playwrights and their most characteristic plays,

with^a view to showing how they are essentially
American in character.

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Summary

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A STUDY OF NATIONAL TRAITS IN AMERICAN DRAMA

I

INTRODUCTION

"A Nation cannot build a palace of art and live in it any more than can a man," says Thomas A. Dickinson. "It can not," he continues, "be a purposed creation, it must be a part of society, an outgrowth of inherent processes of events; and must be a house for the whole family, in which are carried forward all activities of man." ¹

The palace of American drama has had a long line of master builders who were an intimate part of society, and who shaped their ideas and ideals to a logical process of incidents and events in their every day life and national development. Today our drama supplies a palace of pleasure and intellectual growth for our whole national family.

In our nation we still find a great deal of provincialism. As yet we cannot say that our country is one homogeneous whole. It most decidedly is not. It is merely an aggregation of separate units, each one of which has some solidity in itself. There is a certain difference between sections of the country, due perhaps to climate, natural objects, and character of life which shows itself in what dramatists term "local color".

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1- Dickinson, T.H., Case of American Drama.

INTRODUCTION

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One does not need to go as far as the widely disparate attitudes of the North and South to find this distinction based upon

locality. It is found between New York and California, and among neighbors of closer residence; it is found between California and Washington: Massachusetts and Maine: Wisconsin and Indiana: Kansas has an atmosphere, a temper of her own, unlike any other. Pennsylvania could not possibly be mistaken for Colorado, Idaho for Minnesota."

In the face of this certain knowledge there are those who still contend that we do have in our midst a vital, living thing we may legitimately term American drama. And it is true. Although we are in the main stamped by our locality we are still more lastingly branded as Americans.

We are, in general, characterized by our directness. We are quick and decisive even unto bluntness. We are imaginative in a practical way. We are deeply sympathetic, but the vital factor in our make up, says Moses, is our generous supply of humor - not subtle, as the English - but much more good natured and genial. The typical American is clean and healthy. Home is invaluable to him. His temper is quick to renounce abandon in spite of the motley reports we gather from the divorce courts at Reno! His directness is not sympathetic toward what the extremist would term subtlety. The dominant note of American character is action; hence it must be the essential requisite of American drama, as it is of all drama. The peculiar outstanding trait of American life is, according to Moses, "To accept the worst that Fate can deal, and to wring courage from it instead of despair."²

The American playwrights are governed by an American audience which demands that every play be full of the "square

1. Case of American Drama... T. H. Dickenson
2. The American Dramatist... M. J. Moses

locality. It is found between New York and California, and among neighbors of closer residence; it is found between California and Washington; Massachusetts and Maine; Wisconsin and Indiana; Kansas has an atmosphere, a temper of her own, unlike any other. Pennsylvania could not possibly be mistaken for Colorado, Idaho for Minnesota."

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deal" element. "They require the large heart, rather than the subtle one; the direct deed rather than the elusive thought, and the terse answers rather than the veiled meaning compel sympathetic intent in an American crowd." The terms "uplift" and "American" go hand in hand. Moses voices the idea that to be an American is to possess the indisputable right to rise above environment. "Democracy", says he, "knows but one level, and that is the equity of justice. Democracy gives the privilege of drawing no distinctions and of raising no barriers, save those that are made by difference of character." He says that the American is placed on life's highway, and there comes to him in the face of Fate, the American note, "It's up to you"- That's it in a nutshell - and in the native tongue of America. That is the real character of the literature and drama we are seeking, and which we hope to possess.

Bronson Howard once said, "By the term American Drama, I should mean any play that is written by an American or in America by a foreign resident - that is - produced there, and that deals with any subject - using America in the sense of the United States." Now as to general characteristics, Mr. Howard has apparently recognized none as typical of this country alone, so it is logical to conclude that he believes that humanity is universal, no matter if it is, as he says, "Garbed in a cow-puncher's outfit or in a king's uniform". If this be true, then there are no nationalities. A Frenchman on a tour through the United States would lose his nationality and become one of us so completely that he could not be distinguished from the

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Perhaps Hamlin Garland comes nearer to a true analysis. He claims that it is that peculiar quality with which locality stamps a play, which distinguishes the drama of one nation from that of any other. Thomas Dickinson thinks that the drama of the district - or locality plays - will never be untrue to national life, because national life is always implied in the district. It is Augustus' Thomas' opinion that "American drama is written by an American upon American subjects, and is stamped with peculiar humor and distinct character drawing." Let us consider the phrase, "By an American, upon American subjects". How must he account for the great play written about an American by an Englishman- John Drinkwater's "Abraham Lincoln"? Yet the term, "stamped with peculiar humor and distinct character drawing", is a redeeming feature in this definition.

George Ade has, in my opinion, expressed his idea more clearly and truthfully than Howard, Garland, or A. Thomas, when he defined American drama as one in which American characters are dealt with "in such manner as to increase our self-respect, and to give us a new insight into our own characteristics as a people".

When Victor Hugo asserted in "Ruy Blas" that the three types who constitute the average theatre audience are - "The body of spectators who demand action, women who desire emotion, and thinkers who look for character", he gave us the key to the structure of the play itself, for it must be full

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of action, emotion and character study in order to live up to Brunetière's law of drama which is woven about these very elements.

"Drama is a representation of the will of man in conflict with the mysterious powers or natural forces which limit or belittle us: it is one of us thrown living upon the stage, there to struggle against fatality, against social law, against one of his fellow-mortals, against himself, if need be; against the ambitions, the interests, the prejudices, the folly, the malevolence of those who surround him." Conflict, either mental, spiritual or physical, is bound to supply action; incident and situation furnish emotional stimuli, and the characters themselves give us opportunity to trace development of personality.

Barrett H. Clark's terse little statement, that a play is "like every work of art - a presentment of life for the sake of life itself"² seems to summarize very neatly the drama's real function and cause of existence.

In America, Tragedy is an art far removed from the national spirit. We respond much more readily to Comedy: therefore, it may safely be regarded as one of the highest factors in the life of the nation. From the present day standpoint, it more nearly approaches the ethical needs, since it represents optimism instead of pessimism. We, as a nation, should be proud of our fun-loving tendency, since Comedy is, as George Meredith says, "the fountain of sound sense".

Nevertheless, the American is by no means blind to the element

1. Brunetière's Law ... Study of European Drama. (Class work)
2. Study of Modern Drama ... B. H. Clark.

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Nevertheless, the American is by no means blind to the element

of tragedy in his life, although at present there are only a few American tragedies, appearing on the stage. We are, however, getting away from the old demand for happy endings. The American nation has been like a child who loves fairy tales, which are resplendent with beauty, and end in the good old fashioned way, "They lived happily ever after".

Now, however, the adolescent is becoming mature, and while he does not always accept unflinchingly, the logical consequences of a situation, he realizes that life itself is composite of tragic and comic elements - and so it is likewise - with the American people.

Mrs. Joseph Warren, sister of the patriot statesman and writer, of Massachusetts, wrote several satires concerning the Revolution. "The Adulator", published in 1773, dealt with the English-American problem, very thinly disguised. It was a favorite with the New England people. Her second satire, "The Group", dealt with the abrogation of the Massachusetts charter and the appointment by the king of a Council, the Upper House of Massachusetts, through a royal warrant instead of through election by the Assembly. Mrs. Warren's satire needed no "key" for the correct interpretation by the Massachusetts people. She is also credited with writing "The Blockhead" - a prose farce, consisting mainly of conversation

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II

DEVELOPMENT

The very earliest drama of the Colonies was purely an imitation of foreign types. Our first actors were of English origin, but native actors in natural course of time asserted themselves, first as minor characters, and then as rivals of their more experienced predecessors. In like manner native drama asserted itself and as soon as this occurred little American touches and eccentricities began to be noticable and American characters began to be depicted. "Ponteach", the first Indian play, by Major Robert Rogers, appeared in 1766. This play is remarkable for the single reason that it dealt with an American situation - in a typically English manner however. It encouraged the production of other plays dealing with similar subject matter and based on real situations and genuine characters.

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between British officers and Tory refugees, lamenting their starvation in Boston. The coarse style of the play indicates that Mrs. Warren is not its author.

"The Fall of British Tyranny" appeared in 1776. Its authorship is attributed to John or Joseph Leacock. The scene is laid in Boston and the battles of Lexington and Concord are vividly described. In the last scene, at Cambridge, Washington, Charles Lee, and Putnam are discovered in conference. This seems to be the first appearance of George Washington as a character in drama. The negro character in the play is fairly true to life. This play was written in answer to "The Blockade of Boston" (1775), which was in essence an attempt to ridicule the Yankees' holding at bay the English backed by their ships in Boston Harbor. John Leacock is quite likely the author of the disputed "Blockheads".

Out of the struggle for independence our first real American play emerged in 1787, when Royal Tyler wrote "The Contrast", which was a comedy "based on the well worn differences between the native bred American, and the American who has become an Anglo-maniac".¹ "The Contrast" was the first effort of an American dramatist to be subtly American. Tyler realized that in creating American plays the dramatist had to create American conditions. "The Contrast" has what might be termed a plot, with humorous dialogue and well drawn characters. Johnathan, the servant, furnishes us our first American stage Yankee, and gives us an idea concerning the extent of artificiality in social circles. Tyler has created a delight-

1. Article by Streubel in Branch Library News of October, 1916.

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fully humorous dialect, as broad and humorous as the French, and this element alone has done much to make these early plays successful. Tyler was greatly influenced by Sheridan's "The School for Scandal" and Farquhar's "Provoked Husband", but the typical American elements in his productions greatly encouraged William Dunlap and other American writers to contribute to the American stage.

Dunlap closed the eighteenth and opened the nineteenth century, and thus connected a period of our drama under the influence of German and French models, as many of Dunlap's plays will indicate, with a period largely influenced by English and French factors. The nature of these foreign dramas was decidedly restricted because the Classicist rules discouraged all freedom - both of theme and treatment.

The German writer, Kotzebue, sometimes spoken of as the second Shakespeare, was "extremely skillful in producing superficial effectiveness and showy character".¹ Hornblow says that, with the exception of Schiller, there was no other German writer of the period capable of appealing to the public taste. Kotzebue regarded the aristocrat as vicious, the common man as the essence of virtue ; in this he shows the effect of the French Revolution. In addition to these elements he added to his popularity by catering to the sentimental taste of the people.

Dunlap translated and adapted a great many of Kotzebue's plays. Some of these were "Menschenhass und Reue" (The Stranger), 1789; "Das Kind der Liebe" (Lover's Vows), 1799; "Die Indianer in England" (The Indian in England), 1799;

1. History of Theatre in America. Hornblow.

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"Falsche Scham" (False Shame), 1799. He also translated and adapted liberally from the French. His outstanding American play is "Andr ". In this he gave us the first adequate tragedy of American history: a play which can still be read without even implicit apology.

James Nelson Barker is remembered by quality rather than quantity of drama produced. His choice of American themes was not accidental or parochial. He was well read and knew foreign languages, but he felt the need of a native drama and so he set about supplying it. His first produced play was a comedy of manners, "Tears and Smiles", with a Philadelphia setting. It is clearly based upon "The Contrast". The sentiment and moral portions are not so well done as the comedy element, but the play showed promise.

John Howard Payne's plays cover the period between 1815-1827. Barker's works were contemporaneous with those of Payne. He, ^(Barker) advanced American drama by dwelling on Indian themes, in the main, glorifying the savage.

In 1830 "Pocahontas, or The Settlers of Virginia" was produced by George Washington Parke Custis. It was an adaptation of the story of Pocahontas as told in Captain John Smith's "Generall Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles" (1624), and formed a basis for many later versions. Custis, at least, had common sense enough not to endow Pocahontas with the ability to speak blank verse. His dramatic instinct showed itself in his handling of the theme. He did not allow the dramatic scene, in which Smith's

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life is saved, to occur too early in the play, in a useless endeavor to follow historical facts, but he had courage enough to postpone that dramatic scene until the last Act.

Curtis's play "The Railroad", a national drama, was performed in Philadelphia in 1830. The play was a startling innovation because a real steam locomotive carriage was drawn, whistling, across the stage.

During this period so closely connected with the Civil War, many tendencies were at work in our drama. We were producing sea plays. Many so called star plays were written: social dramas of manners were attempted. Mrs. Mowatt's "Fashion" was the best and most successful of the period. "Fashion" is a social satire which is based upon a real understanding of the life it portrays, but picturing it "without bitterness, without nastiness, and without affectation".¹ The plot is not intricate, or especially interesting. It is the character drawing which gives it life.

The first touch of realism - or a desire to show evil as well as good existing in every day life - led to the production of a series of firemen plays, written by Benjamin A. Boker. These plays dealt with the lower aspect of New York City life.

In the middle of the century a new influence invaded American drama in the guise of Dion Boucicault, the Irishman. He chose American themes and wrote typically American plays, dealing with the problems of the day. He is noteworthy in our drama history because he secured the first copyright law, in 1856, which gave the author of a play "along with the sole

1. Representative American Dramatists ---- Guinn

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representative American Dramatists - J. Quinn

right to print and publish the said composition, the sole right also to act, perform, or represent the same".¹ His "Poor of New York" is not a great play, but it shows his sense of theatrical values. "The Octoroon" is his best play. It deals with the love of a white man for a colored woman owned by him and in danger of being taken from him by an enemy under the sanction of the law. It is full of dramatic incidents - melodramatic incidents in reality - showing the influence of the French upon American drama of the times. Boucicault introduced genuine negro characters, a true Southern woman who loved her slaves, a typical European unused to Southern ways, a New England business man, a dyed-in-the-wool villain, and an Indian, all with truth and real ingenuity. He dealt with the slave question so delicately that one cannot decide by reading the play whether its sympathies were with the North or the South.

The Civil War brought a necessary lull in play acting and many theatres were closed. After the war was under way, business was revived - to die a natural death under a heavy load of farces, crude and indecent, reflecting the demoralization of war times.

A reactionary element arose when Bronson Howard produced a series of American society comedies, and literature such as "Saratoga", "Henrietta", or "Shenandoah". As Augustus Thomas says in his "Autobiography of a Play" - "Bronson Howard saw causes, tendencies, and results. His plays are expositions of this chemistry. "Shenandoah" dealt broadly with the forces and feelings behind the Civil War. "The Henrietta" dealt with

1. Representative American Dramatists --- Quinn

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also to act, perform, or represent the same". His "Poor of New
York" is not a great play, but it shows his sense of theatrical

values. "The Doctor" is his best play. It deals with the

love of a white man for a colored woman owned by him and in
danger of being taken from him by an enemy under the sanction

of the law. It is full of dramatic incidents - extraordinary

incidents in reality - showing the influence of the French

upon American drama of the time. Bonaparte introduced gas-

lighting into the theatre, a true Southern woman who loved her

slaves, a typical European unused to Southern ways, a New

England business man, a dyed-in-the-wool villain, and an

Indian, all with truth and real ingenuity. He dealt with the

slave question so delicately that one cannot decide by reading

the play whether his sympathies were with the North or the South.

The Civil War brought a necessary full in play acting

and many theatres were closed. After the war was under way,

business was revived - to die a natural death under a heavy

load of taxes, crude and imbecile, reflecting the demoralization

of war times.

A reactionary element arose when Emerson Howard pro-

duced a series of American society comedies, and literature

such as "Saratoga", "Henriette", or "Shenandoah". As Augustus

Thomas says in his "Autobiography of a Play" - "Emerson Howard

saw causes, tendencies, and results. His plays are expositions

of this character. "Shenandoah" dealt broadly with the forces

and feelings behind the Civil War. "The Henriette" dealt with

A Representative American Dramatist - *Finis*

the American passions for speculation - the money-madness - that was dividing families. "Aristocracy" was a very accurate although satirical seizure of this disposition then in its strongest manifestation, of a newly-rich and Western family of native force to break into the exclusive social set of New York, and to do so through a preparatory European alliance."

Bronson Howard was among the first to realize that America afforded a rich and varied field of drama material, and he did his best, in spite of French influence, to step aside from the highway of conventionality and follow a new and untried path into unknown realms. He was truly American in choice of theme, but he sometimes dealt with American characters in the midst of foreign atmosphere. He was fearless of convention when he created a new type of heroine - a bold, frank, natural girl - wholly at odds with the English ideal of feminine perfection. He aided materially in the struggle against foreign importations. He followed the conventional form, only he gave a single scene to each Act. He is justly called "Dean of American Drama" because he was first to awake to the fact that in the America of his day there was material for an indigenous drama. Probably his most typical play is "Young Mrs. Winthrop" (1882). "It is a kindly sermon on the dangers and blessings of matrimony, besides being an ingratiating and human, perhaps too 'human' comedy".

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He firmly believed in the power of American dramatists to create a national drama which would prove successful, not only on the American stage, but in foreign theatres as well.

Augustus Thomas was born at St. Louis, Missouri, in 1859. His early life was spent in his father's theatre, where he was influenced by the long speeches from Kotzebue, Schiller, and Shakespeare, recited to him by his father, an orator of no mean ability. Augustus^{Thomas} began play writing at the age of fourteen, and from that time on, his literary and dramatic interests increased, until he is now regarded as one of America's foremost dramatists. He is most widely recognized today by "The Witching Hour", which was produced in 1908, and within five years had become one of the leading plays of the period. "It is not a lesson, a sermon, a treatise, a discourse, a debate, or a clinical diagnosis: it is a drama. The word drama means something done, something that occurs in action. Thomas, in writing this play, distinctly and brilliantly exemplified that meaning. The action begins with the first word and ends only with its last one, so that in its chiefly significant passages, it could be comprehended almost without the help of words."¹ Thomas made drama interesting as a transcript of everyday life. His plots are often fragile threads of experience, which he deals with in his characteristically humorous and human way. Thomas secured his education in the "school of experience"; at one time he was engaged as a common workman in railroad freight departments. He mingled with men, mostly of Irish descent, who were, as he expressed it, "Americans rather near the soil". This experience did much toward making him

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broad-minded, for, says he, "Without knowing it, I acquired the ability of getting the other fellow's point of view, and, when I got old enough not to be over wrought by sympathy that was inclined to be too partisan, I found an immense intellectual enjoyment in watching the interplay between temperament and environment." Surely this statement proves Thomas's tendency toward American democracy.

It is frequently stated that American dramatists are seemingly timid about writing sentimental plays. "This is, of course, not true of all (there is Balasco to prove the contrary)", writes Barrett H. Clark,¹ "but it is certain that a large part of our contemporary dramatic literature is not conspicuous for its emotional appeal. Here is one of the short 'love scenes' in 'The Witching Hour':"

Clay Always you when I think about a
real home, - you bet - a house for me - and
you'll be there, won't you? (Takes her in his
arms.)

Viola Will I?

Clay Yes, - say "I will".

Viola I will.
(Re-enter Alice and Helen)

Alice (astonished). Viola!

Clay I've asked her - Mother.

Alice Helen, you knew?

Helen Yes.

Clay (to Alice). And I asked Jack, too.

Alice You mean ---

Clay. We're engaged - if you say it's all
right.

Alice And you - Viola?

Viola .(nodding). Yes ---

1. Study of American Drama -- B. H. Clark

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Viola (nodding). Yes --

Yet this play is American in a great many respects. The dialogue is like the speech of every day life; the characters resemble the people we meet daily on the street, in business, and in our homes. The author is not necessarily especially interested in their philosophy of love, or their sex instincts, or thoughts about God and the universe.

Mr. Thomas is author of at least three plays dealing with telepathy, a subject not generally recognized until some ten years later than the ^{writing} ~~publication~~ of "The Witching Hour" (1908). ^{Published in} "The Harvest Moon" (1909) does not have as interesting a plot, but it does convince one of Mr. Thomas's sincere belief in sub-conscious effect. In "As a Man Thinks", Mr. Thomas has a clear vision of the ideal for which he is striving. "The interesting point to note about Mr. Thomas's telepathic drama is that he does not alone state a problem; in addition he assumes an attitude."

"As a Man Thinks" has, in its last Act, what the American people epitomize as "uplift". Its title is merely a variation of the old biblical phrasing, "As ye sow, so shall ye reap." The play has no single purpose but on the other hand it has no indefinite suggestiveness."

William Vaughn Moody took American drama where Thomas left it and pointed out further possibilities of development. Foreign nations recognize in "The Great Divide" the same quality that is found in the paintings of Winslow Homer, our American artist, whose productions were so well received at the Paris Exposition of 1900. None of his subjects were sufficiently local in character to be recognized as markedly characteristic,

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but they were animated by a certain spirit, that aroused the interest of the observant French, who, susceptible as they are to impressions, were aware of a largeness of outlook - a vigor and freedom of conception and treatment that seemed to them characteristic of what they had heard of the immensity of America and its new mode of life.

Caffin, in further discussion of Moody's "Great Divide", says that it is "one of the rarest and most serious of American plays, representing but a dip into the possibilities of its own theme. This was surely the psychological divide between the respective temperaments of a woman, a product of the old culture of the East, and of a man who represented the newer conditions of the Western frontier."

Clyde Fitch, the clever writer of comedies, and dramas, distinguished himself by writing about American people at a time when the American stage was largely dependent upon importations from abroad. His ideas on the drama are best expressed in his own words: "I feel myself very strongly the particular value - a value which, rightly or wrongly, I can't help feeling inestimable - in a modern play, of reflecting absolutely and truthfully the life and environment about us: every motive, every occupation, every business, every idleness! Life was never so varied, so complex ---- Take what strikes you most, in the hope that it will interest others: take what suits you most to do - what perhaps you can do best, and then do it better. Be truthful, and then nothing can be too big. Nothing should be too small, so long as it is here and there. -- If you inculcate an idea into your play, so much the better for your play, and for you, and for your audience... One should write what one sees,

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but observe under the surface. It is a mistake to look at the reflection of the sky in the water of theatrical convention: instead, look up and into the sky of real life itself." ¹ This quotation sums up Mr. Fitch's whole attitude toward life. He did not always reach his goal, but he at least had a definite one in mind when he set out. His plays are typical of New York City life, but there is a cosmopolitan atmosphere about them which made them very popular abroad. The theme of "The Truth" is of course universally interesting, and the construction is on the whole unusually sound. "The Truth" is recognized as one of the few genuine American comedies of manners.

Percy MacKaye, son of Steele MacKaye, the dramatist, was born in New York City, in 1875. After graduation from Harvard University, he began a campaign to awaken in the American people a sense of civic consciousness, through his own high ideals as set forth in his plays, operas, and pageants. He recognized in American life a fund of indigenous material, and he has utilized American characters, and characteristics throughout his dramatic career. In 1908 he published "The Scare-crow", which is founded upon Hawthorne's story of "Feathertop". It is a delightful combination of the elements of reality and the supernatural, and it gives us some excellent hints concerning New England customs and traditions.

"Like William Vaughn Moody's 'Great Divide' in America, and Pinero's 'Second Mrs. Tangueray' in England, Eugene Walters' 'Easiest Way' proved that a serious and 'unpleasant' study of contemporary life was possible in theatres not used to anything as a rule but conventional optimistic plays. 'The Easiest Way'

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was really a land mark in the American theatre. For the first time a dramatist dared write simply and truthfully of certain 'painful' aspects of life in New York. Here was no false glamour and no conventional presentment of 'sin' in the usual sense of the word." ¹ Eugene Walter realized that the American people were ready to take life as it is, and that they were becoming reconciled to unhappy endings. "Paid in Full" and "The Easiest Way" are, as Clark states, "fearless in their logic, and the author has indeed not succumbed to the temptation of making happy endings".²

George M. Cohan is one of the most widely recognized producers and managers, since the days of Balasco. He has acted, sung, and danced in his own plays - some of which are original, but for the most part they are adapted from other plays or dramatized stories and novels. However, there is about everything he does, an original Cohan style, which endears his productions to the heart of the audience. "Broadway Jones" is Cohan's "original" play; other favorites are "Get-Rich-Quick-Wallingford" and "Seven Keys to Baldpate". There is throughout his work a generous supply of humor and a fundamental American optimism. His plays are by no means "literature", one feels that they are moulded for the stage, and are for acting, not reading. In this Cohan sings true to the American note of action. A great deal of the story of "Broadway Jones" is given in pantomime; the actors do not use sentences, they talk just enough to move the plot along. Cohan's plots are merely series of incidents, all skillfully arranged to tantalize the audience into thinking the climax is at hand. Throughout Cohan's productions we notice the characteristic American lack of sentiment.

1- Moses, Representative Plays by American Authors, Vol. III.
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2. Study of Modern Drama - B.H. Clark.

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"Never does any man express by word or gesture any emotion for a woman stronger than what may be inferred by such remarks as 'You're the little lady for me' --- Americans and English are never quite comfortable during the sentimental scenes in such plays as 'Camille': we wish that people would keep their feelings within bounds. This is precisely what Cohan has done. The moment anyone in his plays begins to get sentimental, he is interrupted." ¹ This does not mean, however, that there is no emotional appeal in Cohan's works. Love is not the only appeal: Cohan has the power of moving an audience to responsive emotion through other alternatives.

The year 1888 should be an outstanding date in the drama world at large, for, in that year, Eugene G. O'Neill, son of the actor James O'Neill, was born at New York. If ever a man secured a liberal education that man was Eugene O'Neill. In his early years he roamed the world over, both on land and sea, consciously or unconsciously gathering material for his life work. The year 1909 found him on a gold prospecting trip to Spanish Honduras. When, because of illness, he was forced to return home, he entered the theatrical world as assistant manager of a company touring the Middle West and East. His next adventure consisted of a sea voyage, aboard a Norwegian barque, from Boston to Buenos Aires. This voyage was followed by a second, from Buenos Aires to Durban, South Africa, and return. For a long period, O'Neill wandered as a vagabond in Buenos Aires, and finally signed as an ordinary sailor on a British tramp vessel bound for New York. The next winter he played a part in his father's "Monte Carlo", touring the far

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West. Finally he became a reporter - while thus engaged, O'Neill's health broke down, and he was forced to spend six months in a sanitarium. While enduring this enforced period of leisure, the desire to write seized him, and the next fall, at the age of 24, he began his first play, "The Web". In 1914-15, O'Neill was a student of Professor Baker's English 47, at Harvard.

During the summer of 1916 O'Neill was at Provincetown and organized the Provincetown Players, who later produced his series of one act plays. At the present time, O'Neill, in company with Robert Edmund Jones and Kenneth MacGowan, is in New York, directing both the Provincetown Playhouse and the Greenwich Village Theatre. O'Neill is widely known abroad, his plays being produced in England, France, and Germany, and translations made in many other languages.

Eugene O'Neill's plays prove that Americans do not produce solely farcical trivialities, exquisitely constructed, like "Daddy Long Legs" and "Nothing But the Truth". They produce in addition these strikingly typical serious dramas, like "Bound East for Cardiff" (1916), "The Long Voyage Home" (1917), "In the Zone" (1917), the tragedy, "Ill" (1917), "Where the Cross is Made" (1918), "The Rope" (1918). These colorful early efforts of O'Neill gave promise of his later heavy productions. He introduced into American drama, at a propitious moment, a new feeling of imaginative possibility. His plays, even his weaker ones, are full of a certain spirit of power and bravery. There is always a striving after the original and worth while. George Jean Nathan, in his very able introduction to Eugene O'Neill's little volume, "The Moon of the Caribbees",

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says, "The essential difference between O'Neill and the majority of his contemporaries in the field of American drama lies in the circumstance that where the latter think of life (where they think of it at all) in terms of drama, O'Neill thinks of drama in terms of life. Thus, where his contemporaries succeed only in writing the kind of play that makes of life a mechanical and spiritless thing of rubber-stamp exits, entrances, bunch-lights, and drop-curtains, O'Neill succeeds in producing life itself. The life he so produces is often not to the taste of American audiences, for it is not always a sweet and pretty life - the life which that audience cherishes across the foot-lights - but life it is, none the less. It pulses from his stages; it quivers from his adjectives and verbs. And it makes his manuscripts warm, beating and vital things. Many American plays have heart. It has remained for O'Neill, to no little extent, to add the blood."

In "The Moon of the Caribbees", O'Neill has introduced a group of characters whom we meet again in "Bound East for Cardiff", "The Long Voyage Home" and "In the Zone". In each play he brings out the peculiarly human traits of some one individual, until we feel that these rough sailors are just like us. These plays bring home the effect of environment and the ghastly result it is possible for the wrong environment to have on the body, mind and soul of man.

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an urging toward goodness, and the higher standard and ideals of life. O'Neill has proved, in this study of character, that the present day generation is not inherently different from other generations, no matter how seemingly indifferent we are.

"Where the Cross is Made" and "The Rope" deal with that phase of money madness, common to the American nation - the chasing of the Almighty Dollar - with absolute disregard for the things of real value in life.

O'Neill's purpose is to go beneath the surface of life and search the soul. "Emperor Jones" is the analysis of a man's soul, so conceived that the actions of the characters alone carry the plot along to a simple and direct ending.

"The Emperor Jones" is a powerful stage play: there is, of course, no moralizing and no extraneous philosophy, and yet it has a point." ¹

"Anna Christie" is the one big play which falls rather flat, because O'Neill has catered to the public taste for a pleasant ending. The English detest the third act, because it is forced, untruthful, and necessary only for a happy ending, so essential to American theatre goers. But the play does prove that we are getting away from the old tendency to depict only the rich or the so-called upper classes; in fact, all of O'Neill's plays deal with the lower classes of mankind. Humanity may struggle in the mire, or on the mountain tops: it may succeed or fail; but in the mere fact that it struggles, there is a beauty which Eugene O'Neill unerringly finds and depicts. "The Hairy Ape" is a real problem

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play: it deals with the poor uneducated mortal who feels within his being a kinship with all that is noble and good in the world: it shows us the inability of the so-called "refined" upper class to recognize the true worth of a man, and the cruelty and misunderstanding which sends the poor chap to the Gorilla's cage to seek for sympathy and understanding. It is a direct, simple play, thoroughly dramatic in tone. The Austrian poet and dramatist, Hopmannsthal, writes (in an article on O'Neill) that "it is a little disappointing to a European with his complex background, to see the arrow strike the target toward which he has watched it speeding all the while, as directly as it does in the close of 'The Hairy Ape'." We have no "complex background" to worry about, so we accept, unquestioningly, what seems to us a logical and inevitable outcome.

O'Neill's latest production is "Desire Under the Elms". The drama has a typical New England setting - and, quoting Robert Garland, in an article in the Theatre Arts Monthly, "There are moments - high, bold, relentless moments - when this stark New England tragedy is more than you can bear. Life is here - life and irony and an utter lack of prettification..... The play is a narrative of hardness and loveliness - that hardness which is Nature's, and loveliness which is God's." ¹ The style is that of "Beyond the Horizon" - only it is finer, more passion, and less pathos; "it has a more adult point of view, a greater inevitability in the almost too persistent tragedy". ¹ Garland adds that the play possesses a mordant sense of humor.

Eugene O'Neill, dramatist, proves that the Americans have at last pulled away from conventionality; America is

1. Theatre Arts Monthly - Jan. '25.

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facing the land of the Unknown, ready and willing to meet new problems and settle old ones. She, as well as foreign nations, realizes that she has the inborn power, the natural pride, essential to begin everything at the beginning, to discover the world anew, and with clear comprehension establish herself permanently in it.

Harold Brighthouse, an Englishman, in a very interesting article in the Theatre Arts Monthly, writes of the very marked advance American drama has made in the last few years. Says he, "This year has proved to me the existence of notable plays by Eugene O'Neill - and it has gone farther, and shown me that O'Neill is not the only American dramatist of note."

It is only fair to list among the famous playwrights at least one popular - and deservedly popular - woman, Rachel Crothers, who, within the last decade, has produced several timely plays. Her early plays, "The Three of Us" (1906), and "A Man's World" (1910), gave signs of active reasoning. "Mr. Howard once said that in Rachel Crothers' "The Three of Us", such a heroine as is there portrayed - one who enters a man's room at midnight, to outface his threats and to outwit his claim that he will compromise her - was thirty or forty years in coming".² Surely this proves Rachel Crothers' clear insight into social ideals of the future.

Miss Crothers, in her later plays, is getting away from the conventionality of theme, and development of human character, we find in "A Man's World", which is an attractive and appealing story of New York life, "Mary the Third" and

1. Theatre Arts Monthly -- May '24.
"As a Londoner Sees it."

2. Case of American Drama -- T. H. Dickinson.

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1. Theatre Arts Monthly - May '11
2. Case of American Drama - W. H. D. L. L.

"Expressing Willie" deal with psychoanalysis. Granddaughter Mary, especially, in "Mary, the Third", thinks that she has escaped from the bonds of sentiment, and has firmly resolved to choose her husband coolly and logically, because she feels that her Mother and Grandmother have missed the true romance of life. In the end, however, poor Mary is swept off her feet, into matrimony, just as her elders were. The two stories - or three, should I say? - are admirably blended. "The outcome, without sacrificing logic to sentimentality, is reasonably happy." "It is stimulating, humorous, thoughtful, and has a definite appeal to the emotions, without being "gushing," or mawkishly sentimental.

Rachel Crothers does not write heavy plays. She always has a very pleasing sense of balance, and her humor delights us. Take, for example, "Expressing Willie". "This comedy, which was presented last spring, has survived the summer in spite of the fact that the Great American Public does not, as a rule, respond to subtleties. However, when subtlety (as in this play) is at once so clear and definite in its conclusions, the result is an agreeable stimulation of the mental as well as the emotional faculties." ^{2.} Boston liked the play when it was presented at the St. James Theatre this fall. It is such a possible play: the characters are so human: the situations so logical: and yet the whole moral tone, with its touches of Bohemian-Americanism, is candid and natural. The story is that of Willie Smith, the son of a tooth-paste king, who is worth millions." His shrewd Yankee mother sees him falling under the influence of a group of cheating self-expressionists, and seeks to save him by inviting his small-town sweetheart, Minnie Whitcomb, to visit him in his

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Italian villa on Long Island. Minnie and the self-expressionists are there over the same week-end. She is awkward and unhappy, but she knows music and is the only real soul among them, which Willie discovers in time to save himself and his money."¹ Willie is typical of our newly-rich type of man. Minnie is a sweet, sensible girl, and Mrs. Smith portrays the shrewd New England matron to perfection. The characters are typically American in their dislike of sentimental "twaddle" - and their keen insight into humorous situations. Miss Crothers is deeply interested in the problems of married life; woman's rights and responsibilities; and all problems created by some demand of woman's nature. She attacks the basis of the social and moral law which treats the woman unfairly, and she shows the responsibility of good women for the so-called double standard of morality. Miss Crothers is a very worth while contemporary of our best modern dramatists.

Storm Jameson wrote some time ago that no great play could be composed about a little character. Thomas H. Dickinson, in an article in the Theatre Arts Monthly,² disagrees with this statement. "Rather than say that no great play can be written about a little man, I would say that the little man is peculiarly a subject for a great play. It is not the business of a play to magnify a man. A great play is more likely to belittle man, for it throws him in the grip of great circumstances of which he is but a shadow and an atom. Nothing is so puerile, so futile, so infinitesimal, if you please, as man's poor magnitudes. Take a play in which man is shown to be master of his fate and you have a little play." Our American playwrights are realizing the

1. Drama Calendar -- Jan. 28. 1924.

2. Theatre Arts Monthly -- Nov. 1924

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1. Theatre Arts Monthly - Jan. 1924
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truth of this, and they are choosing for their themes, the every day life of the average citizen. They are depicting his joys, sorrows, success and failure, love and hatred. The character in the modern play~~s~~ is, indeed, "one of us ~~thrown~~ living upon the stage".

The plays of 1923-24 are of a more serious nature than they appear on the surface. Take, for example, Lewis Beach's "The Goose Hangs High". Surely the seasoned American playwrights who chose it, as the initial offering of their newly organized company, knew the manner and matter of success. "Here is a little bit of characterization, a touch of bitterness and a great deal of sentiment. The situation approaches reality at times, comes just near enough to arouse a tear or two, and then slips jauntily on into 'happiness for everyone'." ¹

"A few of the reviewers acknowledged a half-suppressed fear that the story had too happy an ending to be wholly artistic, but they all admitted that as a transcript of life it was mostly true and observantly written." ¹ Theatre-goers like the play, they say it is typical of America today, with its "jazzy" modern tendency. It is typical of America as a whole; not merely representative of a portion or section of the country. The characters are possible characters, and the representation of three generations gives one an opportunity to study the very evident change in customs and ideals. It is a sentimental play - yet we are a deeply sentimental people - under our armor of materialism. It is a comedy of home folks; an average American family - in a very possible situation, and the American audience very naturally feels a strong emotional response.

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Summary

As indicated in the Introduction, the purpose of this research in dramatic development, from the first sign of Americanism, to the present day, is to note through the study of the various plays and their respective authors, the predominant American qualities which are peculiarly outstanding in the contributions we are making to modern drama. From our detailed study we find these qualities are practical imagination, lack of sentiment, warmhearted sympathy and good natured spontaneous humor. These qualities united produce in us that keen desire to see that everyone has an equal chance in life. This is the underlying motive of Eugene O'Neill - the potent factor which causes him to choose unerringly the lower classes; by reproducing so faithfully their emotional reactions he creates the impulse toward democracy. We feel when we read his plays that his voice epitomizes the American ideal of the "square deal" element of our national mind.

Our modern dramatists unconsciously radiate a sympathetic glow all around the home-life of the average American family. Their plays inspire a faith in the future; we feel that the present-day generation, while seemingly frivolous on the surface, is of pure gold beneath the artificial lustre. Our national love for the optimistic in life tends to keep our national drama from becoming satirical and bitter. Our dramatists, with a few exceptions, such as O'Neill, tend to view life with a twinkling eye, which sees the humorous element

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in our lives. Our modern trend towards realism, however, teaches us that life is not all comedy; tragedy, too, has its place in the dramatic world.

In spite of our dialectic plays, we can still understand and appreciate the national elements which stamp our plays with the bigness and broadness of the American outlook on life.

It is true that the American people do not, as a rule, parade their sentimental emotions before the public. Yet we are a widely sympathetic and affectionate people. Our emotions are easily aroused by the little every-day things of life, while the bigger ones, such as love for sweetheart, parents, children, are seldom referred to in every-day life.

We are a thoughtful nationality and this side of our nature is discovered in our drama. Underneath themes and plots (even of comedy) are concrete problems; characters are reproductions of individuals face to face with life.

We cannot claim that American drama is a literary product, because most of the present day drama is written solely for the stage. It may be unliterary, but it is deeply significant in its social reflection - significant because it has in most cases kept close to the soil and has tried to truthfully reflect passing national events. Moreover, it has tended to strengthen the American faith in American ability, and it has convinced foreign nations that a new country can build up a new drama, distinctly typical of that nationality.

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